

# *The Mahayana Dharma-realm Without Distinction*

(T1626.31)

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I bow to the *bodhicitta*

And the ability to devise excellent skillful means.

Becoming free of the birth, old age, death,

Illness, and discomfort is based on the overcoming of error. (1)

Briefly speaking, *bodhicitta* [1] has twelve topics, and these are this present work's substance. Those of sharp wisdom should know as a sequence what is said to be its result, its cause, its self-nature, its distinct name, its being without distinction, its separate positions, its being without taint, its everlastingness, its correspondence, the meaning of its inactive benefit, the meaning of its active benefit, and its singular nature. Among these, the very first demonstrates the *bodhicitta*'s result, leading to seeing its excellent benefit. Next, then, is a discussion of the cause of its arising. And the very last section establishes this that produces the mark of its birth and demonstrates that it is distinctly named and yet without distinction. In all positions, it is devoid of the taint of clinging. It is a constant and pure Dharma, yet is concomittant. Within the impure position, there is no function of its merits, while in pure positions, it is able to actively bestow blessings. The singular nature should be known as Nirvana. Thus are the twelve topics. Now, in this work, these will be successively elaborated.

What is it that is called the result of the *bodhicitta*? It refers to that most tranquil realm of Nirvana (*nirvana-dhaatu*) [2]. This it is only the Buddhas who realize and no others are able to attain it. And why is that? Because it is only the Buddhas, the Tathaagatas, who are able to forever bring to cessaton all the minute and suble afflictions and passions [3]. Because in that there is no birth, forever unrepeated is the birth of mind or the birth of *skandhas* [4]. Because there is no old age, these merits are developed to the very most

perfection, ultimate and without decline or change. Because there is no death, they forever depart inconceivably from change, transformation, and death. Because there is no illness, all the afflictions that are known as obstruction, illness, and habitual energy, these are forever ended. Because there is no discomfort, being based on the beginningless past, coming to the abiding place of ignorance (*avidya*) [5], and having habits, these are forever removed. Because there is no error, all the bodily, verbal, and mental mistakes and immoralities are not done.

This, therefore, comes from the *bodhicitta* performing the most excellent skillful means and not going back to error, thus causing all virtues. It arrives in the ultimate and so attains that fruit. That fruit, then, is the realm of Nirvana. What is the realm of Nirvana? It refers to that to which the Buddhas turn, based upon the mark of the inconceivable essential body (*dharma-kaaya*) [6]. It is by the *bodhicitta* that this inconceivable fruit is caused. It is because of this that like a full moon in its first period that I now bow to it.

Furthermore,

It is able to advantage the world's good Dharma,  
The noble Dharma, the Buddhas  
And those who depend on them. A precious place is such.  
It is like the Earth, ocean, and seeds. (2)

Furthermore, the *bodhicitta* is like the Earth, since what depends on it is the sprouting, birth, and development of all the worldly good. It is like the ocean since it is a place where all the noble Dharmas are like a heap of precious pearls. It is like seed because it is the cause of all the Buddha-trees being produced and inherited [7].

Thus having discussed the fruit of *bodhicitta*, what then is the cause of it?

Faith is its seed,  
*Praj~na* its mother,  
*Samaadhi* its womb, [8]  
And great compassion the breast that nourishes it. (3)

Furthermore, what is the heap of its causes? It should be known as the wheel-turning prince. Among them is regarding the Dharma the profound faith that is the *bodhicitta*'s seed. The thorough penetration of wisdom is the mother. *Samaadhi* is the womb. Because from concentration is the joyful abiding in all good Dharmas, it's establishment is attained. The great compassion is the mother's breast. It is because one commiserates with the sentient beings who are in *samsara* [9], without ever giving up or tiring, that the knowledge of all modes is perfectly fullfilled.

What is its self-nature?

The self-nature is to be untainted by clings,  
Like the fire jewel, space, and water.

The light Dharma that is consummated  
Is just like the king of mountains [10]. (4)

Furthermore, it should be known that once this *bodhicitta*'s causes have been piled up, it has two characteristics. They are the characteristic of being free of taint and pure. The other is the characteristic of the light Dharma being complete.

The characteristic of being free of taint and pure: This refers, then, to this mind's self-nature of not being tainted. Further, it is leaving the wayfarer's inn [11] of defilement, affliction, and obstruction, and so it becomes pure. It is just like a burning *mani* pearl [12], sky, and water. It is the ashes that dirty [the pearl], and the clouds and mud that obscure seeing [the the sky and water]. While their self-nature is tainted by nothing, just so it is because of being removed from and made free of ash that causes the fire to become pure. Thus is it that the self-nature of all sentient beings is the mind without discriminations. While the cravings afflict them, they cannot be tainted by them. Just so, it is because of being removed from and made free of cravings that their minds become pure.

The characteristic of the light Dharma that completes it: This refers thus to the self-nature that is the pure mind, on which all light Dharmas do depend. Therefore, with all the light and pure Dharmas its nature is completed. It is like the saying that the myriad jewels depend upon mount Sumeru because, therefore, with the myriad jewels is it formed.

What is its distinct name?

Arriving at the seat of Buddhahood  
Is not called *bodhicitta*  
But rather is called the worthy (*aarhan*),  
The liberation of purity, self, joy, and constancy;

This mind's nature is luminous and clear.  
And the Dharma-realm is equal in substance to it.  
The Tathagata depends on this mind  
That is said to be the inconceivable Dharma. (5)

Furthermore, this *bodhicitta* is forever removed from all the wayfarer's inn's defilements, errors, and evils, but not removed from all the virtues consummated there. Attaining the four kinds of the supreme perfections (*paraamitaas*) [13] is called the essential body of the Tathaagata. As is it said, the World Honored One's, the Tathaagata's, essential body then is the perfection of constancy, the perfection of joy, the perfection of self, and the perfection of purity. Regarding the Tathaagata's essential body, then, the wayfarer's inn of defilement and affliction is what taints the self-nature, the pure mind discriminating with names and words. Further as it is said, "Sariputra, the nature of this pure Dharma then is the Dharma-realm. The self depends on this self-nature, this pure mind. It is said to be the inconceivable Dharma."

What is without distinction?

Within the essential body the sentient beings  
Are originally indistinct images  
Without action, without beginning or ending,  
And also without any taint or stain.

The knowledge of the nature's emptiness is what is known.  
The markless nobility is what is practiced.  
All things are its basis.  
And temporarality and eternity are both left behind. (6)

Furthermore, this *bodhicitta* resides within the bodies of all sentient beings and has ten marks of non-distinction. It is without action because it is unconditioned. It is beginningless because it is unarisen. It is unending because it is without cessation. It is without stain because its self-nature is purity. The knowledge of the nature's emptiness is what is known because of the single-flavored characteristic of all things (*sarvadharmas*) being selfless. It is without image or character because it is without the [sensory] faculties. The noble is what is practice because it is the Buddha's great and noble perspective. All things are its basis because it is both tainted and pure things that are its basis. It is not eternal because the various taints are not eternal by nature (*dharmataa*). It is not temporary because the pure is not temporary by nature.

What are the separate positions?

Impure is the realm of sentient beings (*sattvadhaatu*).  
Within the tainted is the pure *bodhisattva*.  
The one who is the very utmost in purity  
Is said to be the Tathaagata. (7)

Furthermore, because this *bodhicitta* is marked by non-distinction, when in the impure position that is called the realm of sentient beings it is called the *bodhisattva*, and while in the most pure position it is called the Tathaagata. So it is said, "Sariputra, therefore this essential body is fundamental, its boundaries boundless, ensnared by the heap of afflictions. From within the beginningless past of birth and death's destinations, one cycles between arising and ceasing. That is called the realm of sentient beings.

"Furthermore, Sariputra, this essential body wearies of and departs from the discomfort of the circulation in *samsara*. Leaving behind the perspective of all desires, in the ten perfections and 84,000 teachings [14] it searches for *bodhi* and so cultivating those practices. That is called a *bodhisattva*.

"Furthermore, Sariputra, this essential body is liberated from the heap of all the afflictions, distantly removed from all discomfort. Forever removed from all the afflictions and the resulting distress [15] and defilement. It is pure, very pure, the very most pure; resting in the underlying reality (*dharmataa*). To all of the sentient beings in

the ground of clear meditation, it is the exhaustion of that ground of all that is known, ascending to the place of the non-dual man and, becoming unobstructed and nowhere clinging to anything, the sovereign power. This is said to be the Tathaagata, the Arhat, the perfected enlightened.

"This is why, Sariputra, the realm of the sentient beings is not different from the essential body. The essential body is not different from the realm of sentient beings. The realm of sentient beings, then, is the essential body. The essential body, then, is the realm of sentient beings. These are only in name different. They do not in meaning have separation."

Secondly, what is taintless?

Just like the luminous and pure sun  
That is obscured by clouds,  
The afflictions are clouds that if removed  
Allow the sun of the essential body to shine brightly. (8)

This, again, is what is within the impure position. Manifested are measureless afflictions, yet it is not tainted by them. It is just as when the sun's disc is obscured by clouds. Yet, its nature is constant and pure. This mind is also so, because this mix of affliction is only a wayfarer's inn.

What is everlasting?

Just as at the end of an eon (*kalpa*) the fire  
Is unable to burn space [16],  
Thus is it with old age, illness, and death:  
That are unable to burn the Dharma-realm.

As all the worldly beings  
Rest upon space, arising and ending,  
Their roots are also so:  
They rest on being unconditioned by birth and death. (9)

Furthermore, what is there here manifested having birth, old age, and death and is called 'eternal'? It is just as space which, even when eon's calamity of fire arises, is incapable of being harmed. The Dharma-realm is also so. This is why the Sutras says, "World Honored One, birth and death is only provisionally said to exist. World Honored one, death is the roots completely finished and birth is the roots newly arisen. It is not the Tathaagata embryo (*Tathaagata-garbha*) [17] that is born, ages, and dies, or ends and arises. World Honored One, the Tathaagata embryo transcends conditioned characteristics because it is tranquil and constantly abiding, unchanging, and unending.

What is its correspondence?

As a light ray that heats matter  
And a lamp are without a difference in character,  
So it is with the Buddha Dharmas:  
In their underlying reality, they are also thus.

The nature of affliction is characterized by departure,  
For empty is the affliction of the wayfarer's inn.  
The pure Dharma is in constant correspondence  
To the non-empty, undefiled Dharma. (10)

Furthermore, what has yet to achieve the true enlightenment and yet is said to be in correspondence to the Buddha Dharma? It is just like the light ray that heats matter and the lamp that is without any difference in character to that. The Buddha Dharmas in the essential body are also so. As it is said, "Sariputra, the Buddha's essential body possesses the virtuous Dharma just as a lamp has light that heats matter, being neither removed or freed. The mani-pearl's bright color, looks, and shape is also so. Sariputra, the Tathaagata has taught that the Buddha's essential body is a knowledge of the virtuous Dharma that is neither removed or freed. That is called the Tathagata's Dharma that surpasses the sands of the Ganges."

Furthermore, as it is taught that there are two kinds of Tathaagata embryo: emptiness and knowledge. And what are those two? They are the empty Tathaagata embryo, which is the knowledge of all afflictions whether removed or freed; and the non-empty Tathaagata embryo, which is the knowledge of the inconceivable Buddha Dharmas that surpass the sands of the Ganges, whether removed or freed.

What is the meaning of its inactive benefit?

The mound of afflictions ensnare and obscure it,  
So that it is unable to bless sentient beings.  
It is then like the lotus flower that has yet to open,  
Like gold that is in excrement,

And also like the moon at its fullest  
Being eaten by a titan [18]. (11)

Furthermore, sentient beings are the essential body and therefore endowed thus with the virtue in correspondence. So why are they devoid of the functional virtue of a Tathaagata? It should be known that they are like a lotus that has yet to open, their evil views causing petals to remain packed inside. They are like gold that has fallen into a toilet, their resting in enlightenment being seen in the excrement and filth. They are like the full moon being eaten, their self-conceit being like [the titan] Rahu who takes it. They are like a pond whose water is muddied, greed and desire being the mud and earth that is stirred up. They are like a gold mountain that is hidden from view, anger and enmity being the obscuring defilement that covers it up. They are like the sky when it is hidden, dull wittedness being the overcasting of heavy clouds. They are like the sun that

has yet to rise, because they rest in the ground of ignorance and habitual energies. They are like a world that has yet to be created, because they rest in the six [sensory] nexi as in the great body of water [19]. They are like clouds without rain, because marks are mistaken for conditions that are presently manifest. The rest of the verse says,

Like the lotus and gold that has yet to open and be found,  
The Buddha's essence and wayfarer's inn are difficult to discern as well.  
At this time, its virtue does not bless oneself.  
Reversing this, it then can be of great benefit. (12)

What is the meaning of its active benefit?

Like a pond without dirtying mud,  
Like a lotus opened wide,  
And also like real gold:  
It is cleansed of the myriad filths.

Like the sky when it is clear  
With the bright moon and stars all around,  
When departing from desire and liberated  
Its virtue is also thus.

Just as when the sun shines,  
Its awesome light pervades the world.  
Like the earth that yields myriad grains  
And like the sea that produces myriad treasures,

Thus are the blessings to sentient beings.  
Causing one to be freed from the existences,  
One comprehends the nature of those existences,  
And yet there arises in him a great empathy.

Whether finished or not finished,  
Those, they have nothing to which to cling.  
The Buddha mind is like a great cloud,  
Abiding in truth at the limits of the sky.

His *samaadhi* entirely upholds the Dharma,  
And the sweet rain falls according to the seasons.  
All the good sprouts'  
Causes are comparable to these and being born will live a long time. (13)

The meaning in these *gaathaas* is the endowment of having the previous characteristics reversed. One should know, therefore, that this is because the pure essential body is far removed now from the wayfarer's inn of defilement and myriad troubles. Because of the consummation of the merits of his self-nature, the one who realizes this Dharma is

therefore called a Tathaagata, an Arhat, one who is truly enlightened. Always resting in the tranquil, pure, refreshing, and inconceivable realm of Nirvana, he forever experiences a peaceful happiness. Such a one is a place of refuge and honor for all sentient beings.

What is the singular nature?

This, then, is the essential body  
And is also, then, the Tathaagata.  
Thus, as well, is this  
The supreme meaning of the noble truths.

Nirvana is not different from the Buddha,  
Just as ice is not different from water.  
Virtue does not appear separately,  
Which is why there is no difference in Nirvaan.a. (14)

If the Tathaagata and essential body were different from Nirvaan.a, then in the Suutras it would not thus be expounded, as with this verse,

"The realm of sentient beings is pure  
And should be known to be the essential body.  
The essential body, then, is Nirvana  
And Nirvana then is the Tathaagata." (15)

Furthermore, it is as the Sutra that says, "World Honored One, then this supremely unexcelled awakening is called the realm of Nirvana. Then this realm of Nirvana is called the essential body of the Tathaagata. World Honored One, there is no difference with the Tathaagata or with the essential body. The one who is called 'Tathaagata' is then the essential body."

Furthermore, it should be known that these are also not different from the truth of the cessation of suffering. This is why a Sutra says, "It is not by the destruction of suffering that it is called the truth of the cessation of suffering. One who is said to have ceased his suffering is from the beginningless past inactive and unarisen, unborn and undying, unexhausted and departed from exhaustion. He is constant, eternally unchanging and devoid of any termination. His self nature is pure, being distantly removed from all the mound of afflictions. He perfects the inconceivable Buddha Dharmas that surpass the sands of the Ganges, the knowledge of which is neither removed or freed. This is why we say that he is called the essential body of the Tathaagata. World Honored One, when this essential body of the Tathaagata has yet to be free of the mound of afflictions, we say it is called the Tathaagata embryo. World Honored One, the knowledge of the Tathagata embryo is the Tathagata's emptiness and knowledge. World Honored One, the Tathagata embryo is all of the voice-hearers and solitarily awakened ones [\[20\]](#). The fundamental they do not see, the fundamental they do not realize. It is only the Buddha, the World Honored One, who has forever destroyed all the mound of afflictions, for he has the practice that has realized the path to the cessation of all discomfort." This is why it will



be known that the Buddha and Nirvana are devoid of distinction, just as ice when touched is not different from water.

Furthermore, it should be known that there is only the path of one vehicle. If it were not so, then different paths should lead to other Nirvaan.as. It is the same, single Dharma-realm, so how could there be a lower or inferior Nirvaan.a than the most wondrous Nirvaan.a? Also, it cannot be said that from the lower, middling, and higher, the excellent and inferior causes, one then attains the same result. With the manifestation of causes is distinguished their results as well distinguished their reasons. This is why the Sutras say, "World Honored One, really there is no excellent and inferior distinctions to the Dharma that when realized attains Nirvaan.a. World Honored One, equal are the Dharmas that realize Nirvaan.a. World Honored One, equal is the knowledge, equal is the liberation, equal is the liberation of realizing the attainment of Nirvaan.a. This is why, World Honored One, the realm of Nirvaan.a is called the single flavor. That means that it is a equal flavor, the flavor of liberation."

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## Endnotes

1. '*Bodhicitta*'. Literally, 'awakened mind' or 'thought of awakening'. This term is used in a couple different contexts in Mahayana Buddhist texts and scriptures. In one use, it is the initial awakening that causes a person to enter the *bodhisattva* path. In another, it is the fully awakened mind, which is possessed innately by all sentient beings, but which has been fully activated only by a Buddha. In the first use, the term '*bodhicitta*' is best translated as 'thought of awakening', as it is usually described as a momentarily and transformative glimpse of full awakening that causes a being to set off on a spiritual journey, while in the second use the term is best translated as 'awakened mind'. Because of this ambiguity, I have left the term untranslated in the present work. Sthiramati is generally using the term in the second use described above, ie, indicating the fully awakened mind, as it becomes clear as his essay progresses.
2. '*Nirvana-dhaatu*'. Literally, the 'realm of Nirvana'. One should understand that Nirvana is spiritual state attained when all cravings and clingings to the world are ceased, and not a phenomenal or transcendent place (such as Heaven). It is referred to sometimes as a realm because when residing in this spiritual state, the universe is seen quite differently than it is by others and appears like a separate realm altogether.

3. 'Buddha'. Literally, 'The Awakened', an common epithet of one who has fully awakening spiritually and attained Nirvana. It also commonly refers to the founder of the Buddhist teachings historically, Gautama. I make the distinction by using definite articles ('the Buddha') when referring to Gautama, and indefinite articles ('a Buddha') when the epithet is used generically.

'Tathaagata'. Literally, 'The Thus Gone', referring to the exiting of the realm of birth and death. This is a common alternate epithet of a Buddha.

'Afflictions'. This refers as much to emotional affliction as to physical affliction. Generally, it is that which frustrates and inflames one's existence, causing discomforts great and small. The mere possession of an impermanent body and mind subject to illness and malfunction is considered a basic affliction of existence in the realm of birth and death.

4. 'Skandhas'. This is the term for the five components of the temporary human individual (physical, sensations, ideation, volition, and consciousness). I leave it untranslated as it is difficult to translate and any translation would be obscure in any case.
5. 'Avidya'. Literally, 'Without illumination' or 'unseeing'. Ignorance is a crude translation of this term which is so fundamental to the Buddhist perspective. *Avidya* is held to the root cause of one's coming to exist in this plane of affliction, continuing to crave and cling to it, and repeatedly returning without understanding. Hence, 'ignorance' here is the subtle ignorance of the fundamental reality of phenomenal existence.
6. '*dharma-kaaya*'. Literally, the 'essential body'. This is the transcendent self which is realized upon entry into Nirvana. It is variously described, often given the four attributes of eternal, happy, self, and pure. The *dharma-kaaya* theory arose as part of a threefold body of the Buddha theory. The other two are the *nirmana-kaya*, which is the mortal and temporary body that manifests afflictions, and the *sambogha-kaya*, or visionary body, which is the Buddha body seen in meditation, dreams, visions, etc. These two bodies are considered ultimately temporary or illusory, while the *dharma-kaya* represents the transcendental reality underlying the phenomenal. This system was further generalized to also include sentient beings who had yet to achieve Buddhahood.
7. 'Buddha-trees'. Another term for *bodhi*-trees. A *bodhi*-tree is a tree under which a Buddha achieves his final release and fully awakens in his last incarnation. Gautama is said to have achieved his final awakening under a particular tree and this became a facet of Buddhist mythology in which it is theorized that all Buddhas similarly win final awakening under a *bodhi*-tree.
8. '*Praj~naa*'. Transcendental wisdom, this is a special term for wisdom in Mahayana Buddhist texts, which generally refers to the wisdom of transcending all distinctions, appearances, and apparent contradictions that arise from the

sensory world.

'*Samaadhi*'. Samaadhi is a particular type of Buddhist meditation in which one's consciousness is concentrated into a fixed point of awareness.

9. '*Samsara*', literally 'going around' as a wheel in motion. *Samsara* is the realm of birth and death in which sentient beings are continuously being born, dying, and reborn.
10. 'King of mountains'. This is a reference to Mount Sumeru which in Buddhist cosmology is akin to the Greek Mount Olympus in that it is a huge mountain at the center of a world that hold up the heavens in which the gods live above. Each world in the Buddhist universe has such a central mountain supporting the heavens.
11. 'Wayfarer's inn'. This is a reference to the mortal body and mind. It may seem at first a peculiar expression, but it aptly denotes the temporary nature of this existence in the Buddhist perspective; that ultimately it will be left behind, as a traveller leaves behind an inn he rests at for a time while on a long journey.
12. '*Mani* pearl'. This is a particular type of brilliant pearl various described. Sometimes, they are ascribed majical qualities, such as having a continous swirl of colors, etc. Because the pearl does not lose its lustre and is brilliant in color, it is often used as a metaphor for the Buddha or something pure and stainless.
13. '*Paaramitaa*'. Literally, 'crossings' or 'fords' accross which sentient beings cross over the sea of birth and death to the far shore of Nirvana. I've translated the term as 'perfection' because the *paaramitaas* are usually the perfect or ideal virtues, qualities, or practices that become fords by which Nirvana is crossed over to. The most well known system of *paaramitaas* are the six *paaramitaas* of charity, discipline, tolerance, diligence, meditation, and wisdom. There is also a system of ten *paaramitaas*. These systems are the basic framework of Mahayana Buddhist *bodhisattva* theory. In this case, Sthiramati is applying the term *paaramitaa* to four qualities of the self-nature.
14. 'Teachings'. Literally, the text reads 'Dharma gates'.
15. 'Distress'. The text literally reads 'head pains', so distress here is presumably emotional in nature.
16. This is a reference to an ancient Indian myth that every world goes through an extremely long process of formation, aging, and distruction. On this scale of cosmic cycling, time is measured in *kalpas*, or eons, which are said to represent period measured in the millions of years. At the end of a world's lifespan, all is consumed by fire, leaving only space behind. In the remaining space there develops another world and the cycle begins anew.

17. '*Tathaagata-garbha*'. The Chinese reads literally 'Tathaagata-store', but *garbha* means 'embryo, germ, womb'. The expression is a philosophical concept for the innate potentiality that is carried in all sentient beings to be born a Buddha. There is also a well-developed obstetric theory of spiritual transformation in Maahaayana Buddhism which takes the common sentient being as a dormant germ and the *bodhisattva* as an embryonic Buddha. It is from this Indian notion that the Chinese concept of Buddha-nature comes, the term being translated as *fo-hsing* ('Buddha-nature') in some translations of Indian texts found in the Chinese canon, especially those of the Nirvana Sutra. While 'Buddha-nature' is more a gloss than a translation of *tathaagata-garbha* and loses the obstetric connotations of *garbha*, it does not significantly deviate from what *tathaagata-garbha* is meant to signify: namely that sentient beings possess an innate nature from which Buddhas are born.
18. That is, a lunar eclipse. Lunar eclipses were sometimes explained in ancient India as a giant titan (*asura*), named Rahu, blocking the moon's light with his hand, which appears as though the moon is being eaten.
19. The six [sensory] nexi are the six objects of sensation: visual objects, sounds, odors, flavors, tactile objects, and mental objects. The great body of water is a reference to the traditional sequence in Indian world creation, in which first a plane of water forms before the earth of a world forms atop it.
20. 'Voice-hearers'. This is the Chinese translation of '*shravaka*', which is the term for those who listen to the Buddha's teachings and are beginning to learn its meaning. 'Solitarily awakened one' is a Chinese translation of '*pratyeka-buddha*', which denotes those who attain a measure of understanding about the nature of the phenomenal world without the aid of the Buddhist teachings.